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To learn what essay titles appealed to seventh grade students, 40 female and 52 male California students rated each of 100 essay titles according to their interest in writing a composition based on that title. Also, the study was designed to contrast the title preferences of male, female, intellectually-bright, and intellectually-dull subgroups within the seventh grade population. Results revealed that (1) seventh grade students definitely preferred certain essay titles, particularly those related to their adolescent subculture, (2) males generally preferred titles involving sports, science, and animals, whereas females preferred titles covering a great diversity of subject matter, and (3) less intelligent students preferred concrete and personally relevant topics, whereas the intellectually bright students preferred more abstract titles concerning complicated issues. The study implied that since students' attitudes toward writing are significantly affected by the title assigned, teachers should consider the diversity of the class, as well as the educational objectives of the assignment, when choosing a theme topic. (MP)

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Preference Scaling of Titles in English Composition

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the nature and extent of student preferences for titles in English composition. From an initial pool of 3,000 titles, 100 titles were selected. These were presented to ninety-two seventh-grade students with instructions to judge the extent of their interest in writing about each title. Average preference values were obtained for the total group, and separately for males and females, and for intellectually bright and dull students. Results indicate male preferences were for adventure and scientific topics while female preferences were for a wider spectrum of topics. Intellectually bright students preferred the more abstract titles, while the duller students showed preference for titles requiring more concrete descriptive writing.

ONE IMPORTANT goal of research in education has been to seek new ways to increase the quality of student writing. Some projects have focused upon alternative criteria of quality and upon the general factors readers consider essential in good student writing. Surely, proficiency in language skills is important, but the student needs to write about something of interest. Bracken, Moscrip and Rehder (1) state: "The dearth of appropriate subjects is the student's chronic weakness: to him it is the cause of the problem." A relatively neglected area of research in student writing has been the question of the varying levels of student interest in the presented title or topic. Differential preferences for composition titles may well be a potentially important variable in generating student interest in writing.

Consider for a moment the following five titles: *A Wild Surf, Visiting the Zoo, Fascination of the Forbidden, A Fish Story,* and *Prodromus.* Which titles are relatively more popular? Could one title elicit considerable interest in research and another be so negatively valanced as to elicit a strong avoidance response from students? What are the differences in title preferences between the intellectually bright and dull? Are certain titles consistently more appealing to males or to females? This study undertakes to explore answers to some of these questions, by obtaining ratings by students of their potential interest in a wide variety of topics for creative writing.

In particular, this study was designed to (a) evaluate the extent to which seventh-grade students have definite preferences for certain essay titles; and (b) to contrast the title preferences of subgroups within the seventh-grade population, particularly those of males and females, and of intellectually bright as opposed to intellectually dull students.

Method

Ninety-two students, forty females and fifty-two males, were drawn from three suburban Northern California seventh-grade classes. The age range was 11 to 14 with a median of 12.5 years.

Prior to undertaking the ratings, certain of the students were each assigned the task of writing 100 original titles and organizing them into booklet form. From the resulting pool of 3,000 titles, 500 titles were selected by the author using the following criteria: originality, potential for stimulating thought and research, writing and reading interest, and avoidance of any unnecessary duplication. A selected group of superior seventh-grade students then evaluated the five-hundred titles in an effort to achieve a list potentially appealing to persons with different interests. They submitted two-hundred titles for further consideration. The author and three teachers (two males, one female) further edited the list of one-hundred titles. The group of students again re-evaluated the list and with minor changes approved of its final form.

The final form, a booklet of one-hundred titles, was distributed to students from three different classrooms for ratings. Students were asked to pretend that they had been assigned to write a number of compositions or stories. Students were then instructed to rate the titles according to their degree of interest or degree of opposition to writing compositions using each of the titles. Students understood that they did not actually have to write the compositions. The instructions printed on the booklet asked that each student

circle the number which best represented his viewpoint toward each title. A seven point scale was used. The scale ranged from "1," strongly interested, to "7," strongly opposed. The middle category, undecided, was represented by the number "4." Selecting category "4" signified that the judge was neither interested nor opposed to choosing the title. The pooling of judgments in this manner to obtain mean preference values for titles is analagous to the application of the Thurstone method of equal-appearing intervals in attitude scaling (2).

Results

Most and Least Preferred Composition Titles

It is evident from Table 1 that seventh-grade students have definite preferences for certain essay titles. Looking at the data we find a wide dispersion of mean scores. A mean score of 1.97 represents the highest preference value and 5.56 represents the lowest preference value in Table 1. Let us now examine the titles which bear these scores. The most popular title was *A Wild Surf* (1.97), which apparently represents a salient topic in the current adolescent subculture of the West Coast. The most unpopular title was *Visiting the Zoo* (5.56). Although this title was quite unpopular for most students; it was significantly less unpopular for the intellectually dull students. One can only assume that the title, *Visiting the Zoo* generally lacked a sufficient degree of sophistication for most students. *Prodromus* (4.28) and *Syncretistic* (4.26) are difficult words which were left undefined and were presented to the students without explanation. They were intentionally inserted as a check on the understanding of instructions and purposefulness in responding. We would not expect, for example, that students would be extremely interested in writing about a title of which they did not know the meaning. As expected, these titles had little appeal.

Preferences of Males and of Females

Let us now turn our attention to Table 2, which lists the title preferences of the males and females. It may be seen that the general flavor of the titles preferred by males are rather masculine, e.g., *Gory Picture* and *Hold That Line.* The titles in part cover sports, science, and animals. Not surprisingly, some of the significant preferences of the females appear to reflect content ordinarily associated with feminine interests, as for example, in the titles *Dance with Me,* and *Day in Heaven.* In contrast to the male title preferences, the female selection of titles spans a wide range of subject matter, including advice, law, music, art, mystery, and personal impressions. On the whole female title choices were also higher in mean preference value than the corresponding mean preference values of the males, reflecting perhaps a greater range of interest in writing about a diversity of topics.

Preferences of the Intellectually Bright and the Intellectually Dull

Table 3 presents data contrasting the title preferences of the intellectually bright versus the intellectually dull. These students were differentiated on the basis of mental age scores from the 1957 edition of the California Test of Mental Maturity. High and low groups were determined by splitting the entire group at the median. Four students, on whom test scores were unavailable were dropped from this analysis. In general, the

Table 1.—Most and Least Preferred Composition Titles of Seventh-Grade Students

Titles Most Preferred		Titles Least Preferred	
Title	Mean Preference Value	Title	Mean Preference Value
A Wild Surf	1.97	Syncretistic	4.26
Disappearance Into Darkness	2.20	Prodromus	4.28
One Year Left to Live	2.22	A Trifle	4.35
Fascination of the Forbidden	2.34	Soldier Who Was A Poet	4.44
Whistling Nightmare	2.37	Dance With Me	4.50
Journey That Never Ends	2.45	Legal Fishbowl	4.57
Flight to Disaster	2.52	The Table Tap	4.59
What's In the Future?	2.57	A Fish Story	4.76
Troubled City	2.59	Electrics	4.86
No Returning	2.61	Popular Concert	5.31
Road to Nowhere	2.61	Visiting the Zoo	5.56

Note: On this and all subsequent tables, differences between mean preference values of subgroups are significant at the .05 level or better using the t-test.

Table 2.—Title Preferences Significantly Preferred by Males and by Females

Male Preferences	Female Preferences
Devil's Army	Verdict: Guilty
Night Watchers	Day In Heaven
Space Settlement	Caught In The Act
The Transformers	Don't Turn Back!
Hold That Line!	Spark of Excitement
One Minute to Play	My Measure of Maturity
Reptile Rage	A Carousel Called Life
Jungle Jitters	Today, Tonight, Tomorrow
Strange Science	When I Was Your Age
Gory Picture	Verdict: Innocent
Blow Up!	Oddity Itself
Careful, Elephant Crossing	More Than Ever
The Living Puppet	Mr. Distinguished Relative
Electrics	Winter Gloom
	My Saddest Day
	Dance With Me

less intelligent students avoided abstract political or scientific questions in preference for more concrete and personally relevant topics like *My Saddest Day*, or *My Pet*. Such simple titles might not unduly tax the dull student's fund of information, nor would they ordinarily require the student to deal with abstractions beyond his first-hand experiences. Evidence for the preferences of the less intelligent students for describing personal experiences may be found from an examination of the titles they chose. Of the six significant preferences chosen, three contained the personal pronoun "my." Among the preferences of the intellectually bright, there were none containing any personal pronouns. The bright student's preferences lean more toward abstract titles. Titles like *Silent War for Freedom* or *Empty Cup of Communism*, for example, present more complicated issues than do those typically chosen by the intellectually dull.

Table 3.—Title Preferences of the Intellectually Bright and Intellectually Dull

Intellectually Bright Preferences	Intellectually Dull Preferences
Title	Title
Fascination of the Forbidden	Road to Nowhere
Silent War for Freedom	My Pet
Read the Small Print	My Secret Wish
Empty Cup of Communism	Why?
The Transformers	My Saddest Day
Temple of Light	Visiting the Zoo
Jungle Jitters	
Inevitable	

Discussion

Several implications for teaching creative writing may be drawn from the results. Students in general prefer certain titles over other titles. This is an important consideration in assigning titles for creative writing. For example, when a teacher assigns only three titles, he may unknowingly be offering to the class three titles which the students in general do not prefer. It is at least a plausible hypothesis that students' attitudes will be affected from repetitive use of dull, low preference value titles. This kind of experience may have a relative enduring affect upon a student's desire to engage in writing.

While students in general prefer certain titles over other titles, subgroups had different points of view on title preferences. Males preferred certain titles. Females preferred other titles. The intellectually bright preferred certain titles. The intellectually dull preferred other titles. These results require reflection on the part of the teacher. Hap-hazard title selection may result in dull, low preference value titles or unintentional favoritism to a particular subgroup. The teacher needs to consider her philosophy or teaching objectives in writing. If the teacher's philosophy is to upgrade bright student's work then for example, titles presenting complicated issues, or abstractions might be used. If the class is predominately a remedial writing group, then simple, concrete, personally relevant topics might be most effective. If the teacher's philosophy is to present popular titles appealing to all groups, then one strategy would be to have a variety of titles covering the diversity of interests present in the classroom.

The author is not stressing a particular philosophy but suggesting that teachers give due consideration to their teaching objectives in writing in relation to the kind of titles assigned in the classroom.

FOOTNOTE

1. The author wishes to thank Douglas N. Jackson for suggestions regarding the plan of the study and his critical reading of the manuscript; Robert Greiss and Janice Dresser for assistance in data collection; Irene Everall and Robert Welch for assistance in editing titles; Peter M. Bentler for supervising data analysis; and Ralph Howitt for encouragement.

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